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ABSTRACT

Writing is an important tool in teaching skills to adult basic education (ABE) students. To be a successful teacher of writing, teachers must be successful writers. They must be aware of the writing process and willing to use it daily in their own lives in order to convey its importance and its usefulness to their students. One method of teaching writing to ABE students is to conduct a "Writing for Life" program in the regular basic skills classes. In this method, teachers first make the students feel comfortable about writing, then lead them through the prewriting skills (such as lists, random words, outlines, planning), and finally through the composition process as a regular part of the class. Sometimes the subject of the writing can be the students' personal experiences and life stories, while at other times writing is used to reflect back and clarify thought on subject matter such as mathematics lessons. One aspect of this method is the process-conference approach, a proven, workable way to help ABE students become more confident and capable writers. Process-conference teachers do not assign topics in advance and then make extensive corrections after the writing is finished. Their students choose their own topics, then the teacher works with the students through a series of drafts, talking to the students privately, six or more conferences of one to five minutes each. In the conference, teachers ask questions to help students look at and think about their works. These techniques can help ABE students to become better writers, better learners, better thinkers, and happier human beings. (KC)

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AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PROCESS-CONFERENCE APPROACH TO THE TEACHING OF WRITING SKILLS IN ABE PROGRAMS

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AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PROCESS-CONFERENCE

APPROACH TO THE TEACHING OF WRITING SKILLS IN ABE PROGRAMS

George E. Rutledge

Four years ago, while I was riding on a YATA (York Area Transportation Authority) bus, I started to think about my own writing process, and then about what I was doing to encourage my ABE students to write for personal growth and development. I started to think about writing in this way because I was inspired by a poem which was mounted on an interior display panel of the bus. A few weeks ago I wrote to the nice folks at YATA, telling them that I'd love to share Lewis Gardner's poem, "Stories," with my fellow adult educators at the 1983 National Adult Education Conference in Philadelphia. I'm very happy to be here today with you and with my favorite publication from Poetry On The Buses.

"Stories"

Anyone who ever wrote three consecutive paragraphs
and admitted it
has been told by uncles, drunks, and coworkers
that the stories they've lived
would put all best-sellers to shame
if only someone
would set them down on paper.
Billions of stories die every year
untold, unread, unheard.

Lewis Gardner, 1979

I believe we have an obligation to help our ABE students tell their stories so that their individual struggles and victories will be heard and read. Because I believe that achieving some competence in writing is the right and the responsibility of all members of a democracy and because we are in Philadelphia proclaiming that our conference theme is AAACE: A DECLARATION OF INTERDEPENDENCE, I'd like to offer this challenge from Clifton Fadiman and James Howard (1979, p. 51): "From the inception of the republic, the idea that education and democracy are linked has been part of our tradition. Education without literacy is meaningless. The capacity to read without the capacity to write is almost equally so. In fact, a fair goal might be to reach a national level of literacy at which all citizens are able to write letters to their representatives in Congress. The case for writing, therefore, rests in part on political grounds, on the sense of duty and gratitude we feel as citizens of a free country. It is put concisely by the motto of a recent one-cent stamp: The Ability to Write. A Root of Democracy."

How many of us can honestly say that we enjoy writing? How many of us write for personal growth and development? How many of us write when we don't have to write? How many of us use writing to learn, to find out what we know, to discover what is in our heads? How many of us write every day for personal pleasure? If you don't like to write but do it anyway because it is a part of your job, if you don't enjoy writing for personal, sometimes learning-centered purposes, if you don't write unless you have to write, the conference-process approach to the teaching of writing in ABE programs won't work for you. Ken Donelson takes a very strong position in "Forward to Five Basics in Composition." "English teachers who teach writing (and we all do and we all must) but who do not write are intellectual frauds, another example of the blind leading the blind.

To announce that writing is an important art worth learning when those teachers who so pontificate do not write makes teachers hypocrites, nothing more" (1977, p. 62).

Because many of us have to write on a regular basis in order to do our jobs effectively, I think it's safe to say that most of us value writing to some extent. We appreciate how important our writing skills are or were in enabling us to pass tests, essay exams, and write term papers and maybe even thesis assignments and dissertations. We write the cover letters and resumes and the thank-you notes. We write the memos and reports, and sometimes we write letters that challenge and persuade. The people who read our letters and memos and proposals evaluate us as professionals, as writers, as employees. Our writing might make or break us in terms of career advancement.

But the most fundamental question I want to ask each of you today is whether or not you value writing enough to set a good example for your adult education students. Richard Ulin, in "Equivalent to What? GED High School Equivalency Tests," is aware of how difficult our task might be. "If high school teachers and students are inclined to be pragmatic, and their GED counterparts are even more so, they have even less time to waste on skills which they perceive will not be tested. They have only one objective, passing the GED. Such instruction may be "street smart," may even accomplish its immediate end, but it only serves to short-change students who might otherwise develop genuine language power, the kind that can help them shape and organize experience" (1982, pp. 24-25).

A teacher who writes, who is enthusiastic about encouraging adult education students to write, is absolutely necessary for the success of what I have generally described as a Write-for-Life program. Alan Ziegler, in "Intervening in the Writing Process," emphasizes my point." "I cannot overstress the

importance of teachers having their own writing experiences . . . forming a writing workshop with colleagues, or just sitting down occasionally to write. There are no great secrets to writing that cannot be uncovered in the doing" (1982, p. 6). If we as ABE/GED teachers really value writing, I'm confident that we can help our students become more competent writers. I'm sure that we can help our students feel better about themselves if we provide a nourishing climate for their expressive and public writing experiences and opportunities.

Barbara Danish, author of Writing as a Second Language, cheers us on in the WRITE directions. "Once you have experienced the problems all writers face - the difficulty of finding subjects, or trusting an audience with your ideas and feelings, of taking chances, getting stuck, and all the other scary things that happen when you write - you will be prepared to teach writing with more sympathy and confidence than any single lesson plan or whole book of writing ideas could ever provide" (1981, p. 11).

Before I talk about some techniques that should work to help our students become more literate with the 2nd "R", I think I should mention a few reasons why writing activities and processes should be encouraged and supported in adult ed. classes. If you have students write on a regular basis - at least once every class meeting - during the semester or two that you have the privilege of working with them, I believe they will perform better on the traditional tests that are ahead of them. I'm certainly talking about the Writing Skills Tests of the GED Tests. I'm also talking about the other four GED Tests. Beyond the GED Tests, CLEP tests and the usual kinds of college entrance exams should be less threatening to our "graduates." Some colleges and other secondary educational and training programs also require writing samples from their applicants. To the extent that our students are better able to pass the tests in their lives, I can advocate writing experiences and instruction as one great way to increase

your teaching power, your ability to help your students succeed in examinations or tests.

But another kind of teaching power that might not be so obvious to many of us if we are not already champions of student writing activities and experiences, is our ability to help our students become more capable lifelong learners. Writing for different purposes and occasions, in a variety of modes, much of it never to be seen by others, including the teacher, can increase student learning power. Because student thinking and ownership of ABE/GED reading and other content is enhanced, your teaching power is naturally going to grow. The self-esteem boost that a non-threatening approach to writing instruction can give our ABE/GED students will carry beyond our programs into their community, family, and personal or work-world lives. Many of you know how important that first step is for our students, that decision to attend adult education classes. Many of us know how important those next steps will be. If our students feel better about themselves, if they feel that they have stories to tell and opinions to share, if they feel that they have a voice in society, there is no telling how many very big steps they might take.

So much for establishing general advocacy here. You are here because you enjoy being teachers of adults. You are here because you want to be better teachers. I could spend the entire afternoon just listing reasons why we need to encourage our students to think of themselves as writers. I believe that survival levels for basic literacy are rising. Technology, including word processors and home computers, and the changing nature of the job market point to even higher levels of basic or survival language arts skills for the average consumer, worker, and citizen. Communications skills such as writing and reading are even more necessary for economic survival than they were just ten years ago. Psychic or emotional survival is another concern. Are most of

us teacher/counselors? The positive kinds of things I've seen in classes where writing is valued and encouraged - not just assigned and graded - would make Write-for-Life programs worthwhile - even if we do have a hard time measuring how much our students actually improve as writers. They will be better thinkers and better learners. They will be happier, more productive human beings. The little victories and accomplishments will keep all of us moving in the WRITE directions. Philip and Joan West advise us to be careful but optimistic as we develop comprehensive writing programs. "Techniques in writing that have been developed over the past decade or so can help those who need remedial help and those who need to update their writing skills. To get adults into remedial or enrichment writing classes, however, will not be easy. Writing demands patience and perseverance from even the most experienced writer. If courses are constructed to provide participants with incremental success and if they are offered in an interesting manner, word of mouth is apt to lure adults into them. In a non-threatening environment everyone stands a better chance to succeed" (1980, p. 16).

Let me get into some of the basics of a Write-for-Life program. Some of us work with the same students every day for five days a week, and some of us meet our students in evening classes that meet twice a week. Maybe, if you teach on a very limited part-time basis, you see your students once a week or less. I suggest that daily writing experiences and activities can be incorporated with most traditional ABE/GED programs. I will also tell you that you <u>do</u> have time for the activities I'm describing. You can look at a typical two-hour adult ed. class situation, and probably find some things to eliminate or combine. There are many opportunities for integrated language arts experiences and for learning-centered writing. Let's look at an example.

The adult ed. instructor I observed for this study is responsible for conducting two weekly two-hour ABE/GED classes for the same group of adults. His initial diagnosis and testing indicated that most of these adults were reading within the 6-8th grade range, what we sometimes call ABE II students, with a few in the 4-5 range and some reading in the GED or 9-12 range. This teacher is a former high school English teacher who admits that he was "about as traditional as can be" when he taught composition skills to high school juniors and seniors. He has been encouraging his adults to write about their lives, their concerns, their feelings and frustrations. He has enjoyed the opportunity to connect this writing experience to the PDE's Success Stories program. Last year one of his students was nominated by the local intermediate unit and named as a finalist in the Student-of-the-Year competition. This teacher knows that his students have plenty of stories, experiences, knowledge, and wisdom to share. He knows that people want to write. As Donald Graves says, "The desire to express is relentless. People want others to know what they hold to be truthful. They need the sense of authority that goes with authorship. They need to detach themselves from experience and examine it by writing. Then they need to share what they have discovered through writing" (1978, p. 4).

The first step is to establish a comfort zone for our ABE students. Leon Hymovitz, in "Humanizing the Teaching of Composition Through Continuing Adult Education," says that by taking initiatives, "the teacher reduces tensions, removes barriers, avoids sermons, and overcomes defensiveness" (1977, p. 59). He urges teachers to discuss their own strengths and deficits to promote identification and suggests that to learn to write, one must write and be willing to take risks with an instructor and a group he trusts.

After the first couple class meetings, when the students are feeling more comfortable about their involvement in the program and their relationship with

the instructor, writing activities are less threatening and more likely to result in additional student writing and reading beyond the class meetings. This eagerness to contribute to the classroom activities and to have their writing appraised or critiqued is one of the non-monetary, sometimes priceless rewards of ABE/GED teachers who are process-oriented.

Teachers who are process-oriented are willing to discuss their problems and successes as writers. They are aware that "real" or professional writers work on invention, topic choice, reading and talking, much thinking and incubating, sometimes brainstorming and listing, with mapping or sketching of their ideas. Writers do these things as a part of pre-writing or collecting and planning activities. An early and valuable classroom activity for adult students might be a simple listing exercise to explore some areas of knowledge and expertise or interest that students might consider for later writing opportunities. This particular teacher asked his students to consider the roles or functions they live every day. He collected the lists, read them in private, and discussed some individual possibilities during the next class. He asked questions about some of the hobbies, jobs, and interests of his students. In addition to being a good way to get to know student names and backgrounds, this listing and discussion activity can be a good way to set up opportunities for students to meet and learn more about one another.

During the second or third class session, after all of the usual assessment and orientation tasks are underway or out of the way, a proven Write-for-Life strategy is a one-to-one interview exchange and a brief but sustained writing exercise. Rebecca Rass's article, "About Beginings: How to Use the Techniques of Interviewing to Get an Elders Workshop Going," convinced me to try this writing activity. "Talking about themselves to people who listen and, moreover, take notes, helps them tap their memories, and thereby assert their existence,

and validate their past experiences. Memories and experiences gain new life through written words, and written words are a magic formula which gives permanence to fleeting moments, presence to experiences long gone. The written word has the power to arrest time. The act of writing can make people perceive patterns and meanings to their lives where none seemed to exist before" (1980, p. 11).

Give your students five minutes to tell a partner (someone they don't know if possible) about their interests, hobbies, family situation, hopes, dreams, reasons for being in the ABE/GED class. Encourage them to take a few notes during these interview exchanges. Pass out composition paper, ask the students to write a few sentences about their partners, and then stand back for another five minutes and let them write. Assure them that you will not read the descriptions aloud (without permission from both parties) and that you will not grade spelling, punctuation, and grammar. You will read them and staple or place them with the lists generated during the introductory session.

So far, the students haven't done much writing, but that is a deliberate teaching strategy. If you tell your students on the first night that they will be working on their writing while they are in ABE/GED class, you'll probably scare many of them away. After all, they want basic skills instruction in reading, mathematics, and writing. Unless your adult ed. program is fortunate to have a writing workshop or course as a separate entity, your students have come to you in order to learn what they need to pass whatever test is next. At least some of our students will tell us they don't want to do a lot of writing. If their memories of elementary and high school English classes are like some of mine, I can't blame them for not being excited about taking a writing course or doing a lot of writing in ABE/GED classes. If you ask students if they would like to be better writers, most of them will probably affirm what is a universal human

need - to be heard or read and understood. Donald Murray, in reviewing the exciting work that Kenneth Koch is doing in nursing homes with writers who are 70, 80, 90, and 100 years old, says, "The hunger to write survives as long as the breath to live" (1982, p.147).

Assuming that most teachers will be using and teaching lessons based on commercially published adult ed. ABE/GED texts, and that these texts will be assigned/borrowed by students for in-class and home study, there are many possiblities for learning-centered (a phrase coined by Dr. Robert H. Weiss, Director of the Pennsylvania Writing Project) writing exercises. For example, a teacher might normally present a lesson (usually at the blackboard) on a math concept, refer to the steps and procedures in the text, and then assign practice exercises in the text or on teacher-prepared worksheets. Soon after the lecture or demonstration, if a teacher is process-oriented, the students might be asked to write for a few minutes about what they learned or what is clear and not clear about the lesson. This writing will be collected and read by the teacher who will consider additional teaching or individual materials/assistance to improve student comprehension of the concept. The teacher in my study gave a basic skills geometry lesson. He defined and illustrated the perimeter and area of rectangles and triangles and then introduced the use of formulas to solve perimeter and area problems.

Upon reading the brief learning-centered comments of his students, the teacher immediately became aware of gaps in student knowledge. He returned to the concepts during a later class and spent class time working through several word problems with the students. Student performance on practice tests confirmed that this learning-centered writing activity was worthwhile. The teacher learned that reteaching was needed, and the students learned more. When students are encouraged to write about content - about what they are learning and struggling

to master - I believe they become more perceptive readers and solvers of word problems and reading test questions.

It might be helpful to summarize the main points made by Shirley Haley-James in "Helping Students Learn Through Writing," an article which appeared in Language Arts, October 1982. Writing encourages learning because it focuses thought, makes thought available for inspection, allows more complex thought, translates mental images, is multisensory, and motivates communication. It is most likely to encourage learning when students decide what to write about, talk as part of writing, view writing as a process, have their own reasons for writing, and write frequently. Teachers can link writing to learning subject matter by encouraging students to write in order to gain access to what is known, preserve and express ideas and experiences, inform others, persuade others, transact business, and entertain (1982, pp. 726-731).

I suggest that we should devote ten to thirty minutes during every ABE class to actual writing activities. We should spend some class time writing and observing, unobstrusively, how we and our students write. We need to help our students understand that each of them has a composing process. Toby Fulwiler, in "Why We Teach Writing in the First Place," tells us that composing is the "mental activity which may be said to characterize our very species" (1983, p. 227). I believe, as does Ann Berthoff, that is very important for our students to understand that composing is a process (1981, p. 68). Berthoff writes, "It is generally a surprise to students to learn that writing has anything in common with anything else they have ever done - and for the very good reason that, as it has generally been taught them, it has indeed nothing much to do with anything they have ever done. But writing, taught as a process of making meanings, can be seen to be like taking in a happening, forming an opinion, deciding what's to be done, construing a text, or reading the significance of a landscape. Thinking,

perceiving, writing are all acts of composing: any composition course should insure that students learn the truth of this principle, that making meanings is the work of the active mind and is thus within their natural capacity" (1981, p. 69). We need to teach the writing process, not just talk about it.

Donald Murray, as he discusses composing as a process of discovering meaning, cites the important work of Sondra Perl, Director of the Writing Development Project at Lehman College, CUNY, and quotes her description from p. 18 of the 1979 New York University Education Quarterly. Perl says that "Composing does not occur in a straight-forward, linear fashion. The process is one of accumulating discrete words or phrases down on the paper and then working from these bits to reflect upon, structure, and then further develop what one means to say. It can be thought of as a kind of "retrospective structuring"; movement forward occurs only after one has some sense of where one wants to go. Both aspects, the reading back and the sensing forward, have a clarifying effect. . . . Rereading or backward movements become a way of assessing whether or not the words on the page adequately capture the original sense intended. But constructing simultaneously involves discovery. Writers know more fully what they mean only after having written it. In this way the explicit written form serves as a window on the implicit sense with which one began" (1982, pp. 20-21). Murray notes that collecting, connecting, writing, and reading are four primary forces which seem to interact as our writing "works its way towards its own meaning" (1982, p. 21).

As we study how we and our students write, we'll come to a better understanding of how we prewrite or rehearse, write or draft, and rewrite or revise and how we repeat these activities again and again. We ABE teachers must not identify writing as simply a technical communication skill that occurs in a linear manner. Writing can help us to become better thinkers. "Scientists,

artists, mathematicians, lawyers, engineers - all "think" with pen to paper, chalk to blackboard, hands on terminal keys. Developed thinking is seldom possible, for most of us, any other way" (Fulwiler, p. 277).

Now, let's go back to the early draft one of my ABE students shared with me a few weeks ago. Kim's writing supports the findings of Pearl Aldrich who describes, in Research in the Teaching of English, some factors that interfere with adult writing. These factors include "little or no advance planning of writing tasks, inability to organize content, and fear and avoidance of writing" (1982, p. 298).

As I read Kim's incomplete draft, I was excited by the promise of her story for publication of some kind and by the potential for Kim's personal growth as a writer. I was determined to listen to Kim as she listened to and talked about her own draft. I was determined not to tell her what I thought she should say. I wanted Kim's writing to be hers. I wanted her to know that she could "command and defend" her topic, that it was her territory, her information, and her voice (Graves, 1983, p. 99).

We have looked at the composing process. Now we need to explore the process-conference approach as a proven, workable way to help Kim and thousands of other ABE students become more confident and capable writers. Process-conference teachers do not assign topics in advance and then make extensive corrections after the writing is finished. Their students choose their own topics. A process-comfortable teacher "works with the student through a series of drafts, giving guidance appropriate to the stage through which the writer is passing. By putting ideas on paper the student first discovers what he or she knows and then is guided through repeated drafts that amplify and clarify until the topic is fully expressed. A single completed paper may require six or more conferences of from one to five minutes each" (Graves, 1978, p. 19). Of course, as the

situation warrants, these conferences may be longer.

Donald Murray writes that he has begun to learn the right questions to ask at the beginning of a writing conference (1982, p. 159). "What did you learn from this piece?" "What do you intend to do in the next draft?" "What surprised you in the draft?" "Where is the piece of writing taking you?" "What do you like best in the piece of writing?" "What questions do you have of me?" Thomas Carnicelli, in "The Writing Conference: A One-to-One Conversation," says that the "right questions" the teacher should ask are "those that lead the student to become actively involved in the criticism of the paper" (1980, p. 114).

Because I read Kim's paper carefully, offered encouragement, tried to ask the right questions, and really worked at listening to her during our conference time, I think she is starting to read and listen to her own developing work. She seems to be reacting to her own writing and discovering her own meaning. She is becoming comfortable with revision procedures and much more aware of her own voice as it speaks to other readers. She is being guided to refine her piece with such questions as, "Could you tell me more about this?" "Where are you in this piece?" "Where is the piece taking you?" and "How do you think you could make this better?" As Maity Schrecengost writes in the PCTE Bulletin, "Such questions do not take away the (student's) ownership but help her to develop in the process of writing" (1982, p. 4).

As we hold brief conferences with our ABE students, we should try to articulate some of the questions which, as Donald Murray says," published writers no longer need to articulate while they are listening and relistening, writing and rewriting" (1982, p. 63). I offer the questions and comments in the list below as some possible questions and responses you might use during conferences. These examples are from the work of Jane Kearns, Donald Graves, Donald Murray, and thousands of other writing teachers who believe and have proven that our students, including "hairy-chinned remedial writers" can become more competent and willing writers with this approach (Murray, 1982, p. 63).

Some Possible Types of Questions and Responses Used During Conferences

Tell me about your piece of writing.
What part do you like the best? Why?
Can you tell me more about it?
I'm not sure I understand this part.
Do you have enough information?
Do you have too much information?
How did you feel when this happened? Did you write your feelings?
Why did you choose this subject to write about?
Do you have more than one story?
What did you learn from this piece of writing?
What do you intend to do with the next draft?
What surprised you in the draft?
How does this draft sound when you read it out loud?
Why is this important to you?
How does this piece compare to other pieces you have written? Why?
What kinds of changes have you made from your last draft?
Underline the part that tells what the draft is about.
Circle the part that is the most exciting.
What do you think you can do to make this piece better?
What problems did you have or are you having?
What is the most important thing you are trying to say?
What works so well you'd like to try to develop it further?
How do you feel about your story?
This is what I liked about it.
Are you happy with your beginning and ending?
Explain how your title fits your story.
What are your action words? Can you add others?
What do you need help on?
Where is this piece taking you?
Did you tell us about something or did you show us by using examples?
Can you think of a different way to say this?
Does the beginning grab the reader's attention?
What questions do you have of me?

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Although I am actively involved in helping-some of my ABE students publish their writing and very much aware of how important this public writing can be to our adult education program PR and funding efforts, publication is not my main concern today. The important thing in teaching adults to write, as Anthony Brandt said following an interview with Donald Graves, "is not to put too much emphasis in the beginning on spelling, punctuation, and grammar; those things come later, as the beginning writer gains confidence in his ability to express his thoughts and feelings and becomes more versatile in using that ability" (1982, p. 59).

The process-conference approach to the teaching of writing in ABE programs means leading our adult students "back to their resources, their sense of territory, information, and voice" (Graves, 1983, p. 99).

Two writing experiences that we can give our ABE students in class and encourage them to continue out of class and beyond their precious time with us are journal writing and freewriting. Because there are nearly unlimited uses of and possiblities for journal keeping as an outlet for expressive writing, invention, and discovery, I'll just share my enthusiasm for the potential of this practice in adult education programs. As Denny Wolfe and Robert Reising urge us in their new publication, Writing for Learning in the Content Areas, "It is important to establish the place of journal writing in a writer's (including a student writer's) life, academic or otherwise" (1983, p. 4). Because I feel that freewriting, which can be done in journals, is certainly a worthwhile experience for both ABE teachers and their students, I'd like to conclude our workshop module with a freewriting activity.

Barbara Danish (1981, p. 50) tells us that we can't talk about the important things in our lives and can't figure out what those things mean to us by being someone else. We can't write something that will move other people if we haven't been moved ourselves. Our only way to ourselves is through our own voices. Our only way to writing with power is through our own voices. "Most nonwriters," says Danish, "spend their time imitating writing they've read instead of trying to be themselves. Freewriting - the steadiness of writing and the absence of judgment - helps you find your own way of saying things" (1981, p. 15). "For ten minutes direct your freewriting to a specific person, telling her or him what's on your mind. Since she or he will never read what you write unless you choose to show it, say just what you want to say, in whatever way you want to say it. If you feel bitter write with bitterness; if

you feel generous write with generosity. Do not let the editor (in you) stop you or force you to be reasonable or sensible. If the editor (in you) tries to stop you, write down what she or he says. You are writing to hear your own voice in this situation. Write steadily and do not rush" (Danish, p. 51).

Process-conference techniques can help us help our ABE students become better writers, better learners, better thinkers, and happier human beings. More stories will be told, read, and heard because we ABE teachers asked the right questions and really listened to our students.

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HANDOUT DESIGNED TO SUPPLEMENT
AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PROCESS-CONFERENCE
APPROACH TO THE TEACHING OF WRITING SKILLS IN ABE PROGRAMS

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Kim - Just The Beginning(typed to match her original hand-written copy)

Five years ago, March 1978 - ~~I lost my job~~. Due to circumstances beyond his control, my boss informed me that I would no longer be in his employ. I was at loss for words. What ~~could I say~~? For ~~that matter~~ what ~~could~~ would I do now?

I searched the job market, ~~of which~~ to no avail I came up with nothing. One inexperienced, unskilled eighteen-year old. And to top that off - no high school diploma.

To make matters worse, I am an epileptic. I never lied on any of my applications ~~idic~~ indicating otherwise. I do not feel it ~~is~~ a burden or hinderance. Apparently some employers have and ~~do~~ always will.

I didn't apply for jobs that I knew would endanger myself, but I still couldn't make any headway. ~~Many times~~ Sometimes the situation was hilarious. I would be having an interview and everything was going fine, ~~when they suddenly~~ until he saw my medical report.

Not ~~unu~~ unexpected, but quite suddenly all the positions had been filled - of course I would recicieve a phone call in the event of an opening. . . . I never did.

I could not continue living off my roomates. ~~Eve~~Although that said it ~~didn't~~ wasn't important ~~matter~~, ~~it mattered~~ that fact remained, that it was important to me.

I tried borrowing money from my ~~peers~~ family, but they didn't have it to give. At that point I knew I had no alternative but to go to the Department of Public Welfare.

I ~~qualfieded~~ qualified, with the exception of a Doctors report confirming my epilepsy. My Doctor sent it and that was to be the beginning of a three year period recieving ~~welfare~~ D.P.A.

The process-conference approach to the teaching of writing in an ABE class might follow a script such as the one below. The instructor and student had these conferences over a period of two weeks. Several brief conferences with different students can easily be conducted during one class session.

Conference 1

Kim: I think I'll write about some of the problems I've had finding a job.

George: Why is that topic important to you?

Kim: I've been thinking about the fact that I was on welfare for almost four years. It was depressing. I wanted to make something of myself.

George: I'll be eager to read your first draft.

Conference 2 (Kim has produced the first few pages of her story.)

George: Can you tell me more about the epilepsy and the situation with your roommates?

Kim: Yes. I was thinking about a different beginning. Maybe I'll explain how my physical problems started. The roommates really showed a lot of understanding and patience. I'll probably write more about how they helped me.

George: How did you feel when this happened?

Kim: I was very happy, but the job turned out to be a dead end.

George: Did you write your feelings?

Kim: I want to do more than just give facts. I'll think about how I want to deal with my feelings when I talk about being let go.

Conference 3 (Kim has written a few more pages on the general topic mentioned in the first conference.)

George: What kinds of changes have you made?

Kim: I-thought a couple of things. I think it would be clearer to other readers if I wrote more about the epilepsy. There's a lot of grief being unemployed. Maybe readers who don't have any physical handicaps will think about their self-pity trips.

George: Where is this piece of writing taking you?

Kim: It's making me see my experience better. I was really pretty stupid or ignorant about knowing how to look for a job. I'm more aware of the job market. I think I can do a better job during interviews of selling myself as a good worker.

George: What surprised you in the draft?

Kim: I think I got into too much detail. The part about his expression. It has been with me all these years. Maybe I got caught up in it.

George: What did you like best in the piece?

Kim: I started out with a better opening. I gave a better background for my topic.

George: What is your topic now?

Kim: How rough it is getting and keeping a job when you have a handicap. Not just epilepsy, you know, asthma, Parkinson's disease - things that can lead to self-pity trips.

Conference 4 (Kim has written a new opening.)

George: Tell me about where you are now.

Kim: I put more detail in a few places. I have a completely new beginning. I wanted to give more insights.

George: What's next?

Kim: I want to work on some of the words, to make sure the dictionary definitions and the feelings go together. I also want to go back to when I was seventeen or eighteen and talk about losing my job. I want to say more about my present employers. I want to surprise you.

Conference 5

Kim: I think I want to write anotner piece about my work as a motel maid supervisor. I had trouble at home and ran away. I was able to get that job after a couple other very temporary jobs. I want to write about how hard it is to be on your own away from home. Getting somewhere and surviving.

George: I think you have plenty to write about. Anything else with your piece about finding work when you have handicaps?

Kim: Yes, I'm going to look for spelling and grammar mistakes. I think I'm ready to finish that chapter.

George: Fine. I can see you have found a few of these minor errors already. Any questions for me?

Kim: Did you like my new opening? Do you understand why I went back in time?

George: Yes, I really liked your revisions. I understood your reasons for taking your story back to the accident. What do you think about sharing this story with other adult education students and other staff members?

Kim: I think I have something that should be shared. It might help someone who has had similar problems.

George: Let's talk about that when we clean up this piece next week.

Kim - a selection from a later draft of the same piece

Since much of this story is indirectly ~~in connection~~ concerning my epilepsy, I feel I must take you back with me in time to thirteen years ago.

The year was 1970. I was ten years old and in the fifth grade. The bell for recess rang everyone filing out the door running for the playground - I hung behind never liking the pushing and shoving.

About five minutes later, I stepped out the door, oblivious to the scene around the side of the building. Two boys were playing one on one baseball using the wall as their catcher. I was going to find my friends and join in whatever they were up to, but right as I turned the corner of the building he chose that moment to swing the bat.

I felt myself drowning in darkness, voices shouting, someone holding me all a the same time. The boy that had swung the bat realized, it was my head & not the ball that he hit. ~~I~~ When he saw my legs ~~give way me starting to fall~~ - he had come up behind me, cushioned my fall & held me in his arms.

I awoke only to find myself ~~in some boys arms~~ in my neighbor's arms Keith's embrace staring contently ~~in~~ a me. ~~my eyes~~. In his eyes, I saw pain & sadness. He had not allowed anyone to touch me. When he saw that I had opened my eyes his expression had changed; ~~and he never looked or talked to me after that~~. He helped me get to the nurse's office, and on the way he spologized. He told me he had never seen me coming it all happened too quickly. That day was the first and last he ever spoke to me but to try, as I have - I'll never forget that expression on his face.

About two weeks later, I had my first grand mall epileptic seizure. Its impossible to ~~try and~~ explain what the person them-

Some Recommended Resources for ABE/GED Teachers

Allen, T.D. Writing to Create Ourselves: New Approaches for Teachers, Students, and Writers. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982.

Allen worked with students of predominantly Native American origins, many of whom used English as a second language, but her methods work equally well with any students previously uninspired by traditional approaches to language use. By helping students discover what it is they have to say, they are motivated to gain language skills. By writing, we create ourselves. Students learn grammar and syntax in their functional capacity so that someone else will want to read what they have to say.

Apps, Jerold W. Improving Your Writing Skills: A Learning Plan for Adults. Chicago, Illinois: Follett Publishing Company, 1982.

Written for adults who must write as part of their day-to-day activities. Starts with a guide for assessing writing problems and then suggests a way of correcting them - a "learning plan." Explains how to select courses, conferences, correspondence programs, and other resources. Writing exercises are presented throughout the book so the reader can practice immediately the various skills discussed.

Coughlin, Merle T. Teaching Reading, Writing, and Study Skills Through Health Science Content. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Merle Coughlin, 1976.

Originally devised as a curriculum to make the teaching of basic skills relevant to adults who were interested in health careers, the author says that ABE teachers can easily adapt the course to help adults with other careers in mind, such as business or education, by substituting readings appropriate to those fields. The guide focuses on many skills essential for reading, writing, and studying effectively. This resource book was prepared under a federal grant from the U.S. Office of Education, grant number OEG-0-74-1761.

Dressman, Michael R. "When You Tell Them to Write and They Ask, 'Why Bother?'" Confronting Writing Obstacles, (Ed.) Donald R. Gallo, New Britain, Connecticut: Connecticut Council of Teachers of English, Fall 1977, pp. 11-14.

Stimulating article for ABE teachers to read before they attempt to talk to their students about the value of writing on the job, in school, and in society.

Elbow, Peter. Writing Without Teachers. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

Outlines a practical approach for learning how to write. Elbow's approach is especially helpful to people who get "stuck" or blocked in their writing. Includes guidelines for freewriting exercises and suggestions for keeping a diary. Provides techniques for both the writer and the reader on how to react to one another and includes advice on how to avoid pointless arguments. Elbow challenges the traditional model of the writing process.

Epes, Mary. "Developing New Models of the Comp-Lab Course," Moving Between Practice and Research in Writing, (Ed.) Ann Humes, Los Alamitos, California: SWRL Educational Research and Development, 1981, pp. 139-142.

From 1977 to 1979, York College/CUNY developed the Comp-Lab basic writing course. The course combined traditional classroom instruction with student work in an autotutorial laboratory. Because of the success of the college course, the project designers extended the program to several non-college settings. A model of the Comp-Lab course was developed to improve on-the-job writing skills for employees of the Bronx Psychiatric Center. The course has also been adapted to be used with CETA/JTPA trainees and adult-education students.

Giacomelli, Eloah F. "Writing as an Effective Learning Tool," Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Pacific Northwest Regional Conference on English in the Two-Year College, October, 1982. ED 222 911

A program of carefully controlled and guided writing can be an effective tool to help English as a second language(ESL)students overcome the difficulties they still have with basic English structure, as well as to expand their linguistic boundaries. Tailored to the needs and problems of adult immigrants reading at a level between grades 4 and 6, the program content focuses on features occurring in everyday language. 15p.

Jacobi, Ernst. Writing at Work: Dos, Don'ts, and How Tos. Rochelle Park, NJ: Hayden Book Company, Inc., 1976.

Informative and easy to read, this book offers practical advice that helps business, technical, and professional people or students in writing courses to make their writing sharper and more persuasive. Deals with a variety of writing tasks such as writing letters, reports, newsletters, and long proposals.

Kalister, Rose Ann. "The Adult Learner in the Writing Center: Teaching Techniques," Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Writing Centers Association, May, 1981. ED 209 674

A writing center course designed for adult learners offers features that will work in either a credit or a noncredit course. 7p.

Lodwig, Richard R. Career English. Rochelle Park, NJ: Hayden Book Company, Inc., 1981.

Career part is directed towards the concerns of students going on either for more education or for jobs. The "English" part deals with the language skills essential to getting and keeping a job. The eleven chapters involve students in basic English activities: speaking, listening, writing, reading, interviewing, notetaking, and researching. Interspersed throughout the chapters are case-history interviews with workers in a variety of careers.

Turner, Richard H. The Letters You Write(Follett Success Skills Series). Chicago, Illinois: Follett Publishing Company, 1982.

Especially good for ABE students, this book provides activities that teach about the parts of a letter, the different kinds of letters, effective letter writing, and the postal service. Has twenty-one two-page lessons and a final examination.

Utah State Office of Education. "Adult Education Basic Skills Task Force: Writing Skills," Salt Lake City, 1982. ED 219 795

The basic communication skills task force consisted of twelve adult education teachers from several local programs. The task force developed basic skills curricula for reading, writing, speaking, and listening. The curricula materials are contained in three separate booklets: (1) Reading, (2) Writing, and (3) Speaking and Listening. Each booklet contains pretests, remediation exercises, post tests, and additional resource materials for selected basic objectives; and reflects a developmental beginning for continuing work on basic adult skills curriculum. Materials in this booklet may be duplicated, adapted, and/or enriched - as long as they are well used. 194p.

Weinstein, Carole and Bonne August. "Applied Writing: A Writing Skills Curriculum for Adult Learners," Albany, New York: New York State Education Department, June, 1981. ED 216 709

This writing skills curriculum provides ABE teachers with a perspective on intended writing goals for their ABE students, delineates specific writing objectives, and presents a framework within which writing activities can effectively take place. An excellent source of process-oriented writing activities. 83p.